DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 014 CS 203 560

AUTHOR Morse, Philip S.
TITLE What Open Education Says to the Teacher of English.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education (15th, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Arrangement; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Furniture Arrangement; *Individual Instruction; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Open Education; *Psychological Needs; Small Group Instruction; Space Utilization; Student Grouping; *Teacher Role; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This paper examines five factors that should be considered in planning an open education program in an English classroom: (1) The physical layout of the room should be carefully planned to support the learning needs and characteristics of students. (2) Three types of learning activities should be provided: activities for the entire class, for small groups, and for individual students. (3) Subject-matter areas should be integrated, both within and without the English curriculum. (4) The psychological environment should be planned to promote challenge with little threat. (5) The role of the teacher should be that of supporter or facilitator of the learning process, rather than that of disseminator of knowledge. The paper notes specific ways in which teachers can arrange classroom space, individualize learning activities, and group students that will not prove psychologically damaging to them. Seven diagrams of alternative room arrangements are provided. (GW)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Philip S. Morse
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED143014

What Open Education Says to the Teacher of English

by

Philip S. Morse

An interesting and much-studied occurrence in American education today is the rise and fall of innovative ideas and concepts such as open education. It is often true that the constant change from one educational scene to another suggests a far more serious difficulty - the lack of substance, the mistaking of glitter and excitement for sound, meaningful, lasting educational programs. In relating the area of open education to the teaching of English we confront this problem directly. If we are to apply the principles of open education to the English classroom, we must first make clear what we mean by open education and then what it is in the concept that is of value to the teacher of English.

In properly defining the open concept it is essential to provide a definition of learning. Jean Piaget, the world-famous child psychologist, comes closest to epitomizing the spirit and feel for learning behind the open concept and how this can pertain to alternative approaches in English classrooms.

Piaget's findings generally support the idea that a student learns best in an experientially-based, responsive classroom

CS203560

where he can touch, test, react to, correct, manipulate and use materials and resources first-hand as part of his own immediate interaction with the world around him. Closely related to Piaget's thoughts is the well-known Chinese proverb -- "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." Piaget feels that thinking and the development of knowledge is an active process requiring an interaction between the organism and his environment. If we assume that learning which is immediate and which makes a difference to the student is the kind of learning we are trying to establish, then we must look at the English classroom in terms of the kinds of elements that would support this view of learning.

This article will deal with five areas which underlie the restructuring of an English classroom in light of the open concept and which are consistent with our definition of learning:

1. The physical structure of the room
2. The levels and kinds of student involvement
3. The integration of subject matter areas within and outside the English curriculum
4. The psychological atmosphere
5. The role of the teacher

First of all, the physical environment in the English classroom is usually treated lightly, if at all. This would include not only the physical layout of the classroom but also what one

includes in the way of furniture, wall hangings, desk arrangements, interest centers, and the like. By implication, the physical environment also goes outside the classroom and involves the use of community resources. A booklet such as Yellow Pages of Learning Resources published by the Group for Environmental Education (MIT Press, 1972) is a helpful reference in exploring this area.

Finally and most important is the attitude of the teacher toward the learning needs and characteristics of the student that will be supported in the designing and reconstructing of a classroom. Unfortunately, change often takes place without the teacher asking how or in what ways it will improve the overall quality of learning in the classroom.

The flexible use of space in a classroom does not necessarily mean a classroom without walls or an open plan design. A physically open classroom in the sense of having movable partitions or two or three teachers sharing a large space can be just as closed psychologically as what one is reacting against. Indeed, it can be worse because, in addition to the physical and curricular rigidity, one must deal with everyone else's noise and confusion. Furthermore, open space can become very much like army barracks. When a student wants to be by himself to read or just to think, there are sometimes few if any truly quiet places.

Barbara Blitz in her book The Open Classroom: Making it Work[1] offers a number of alternative room arrangements as a way of moving toward more classroom interaction and physical involvement:

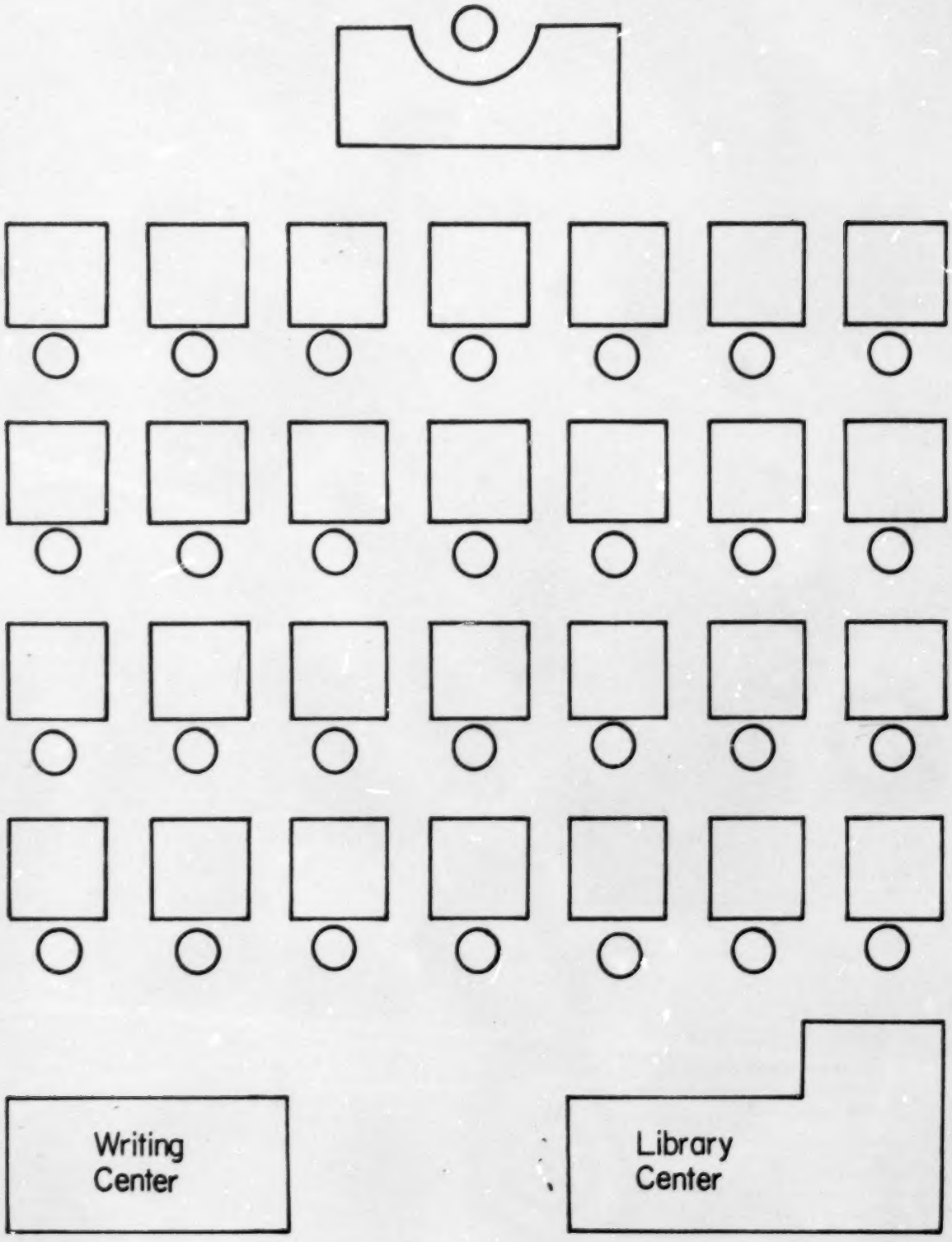

FIGURE I

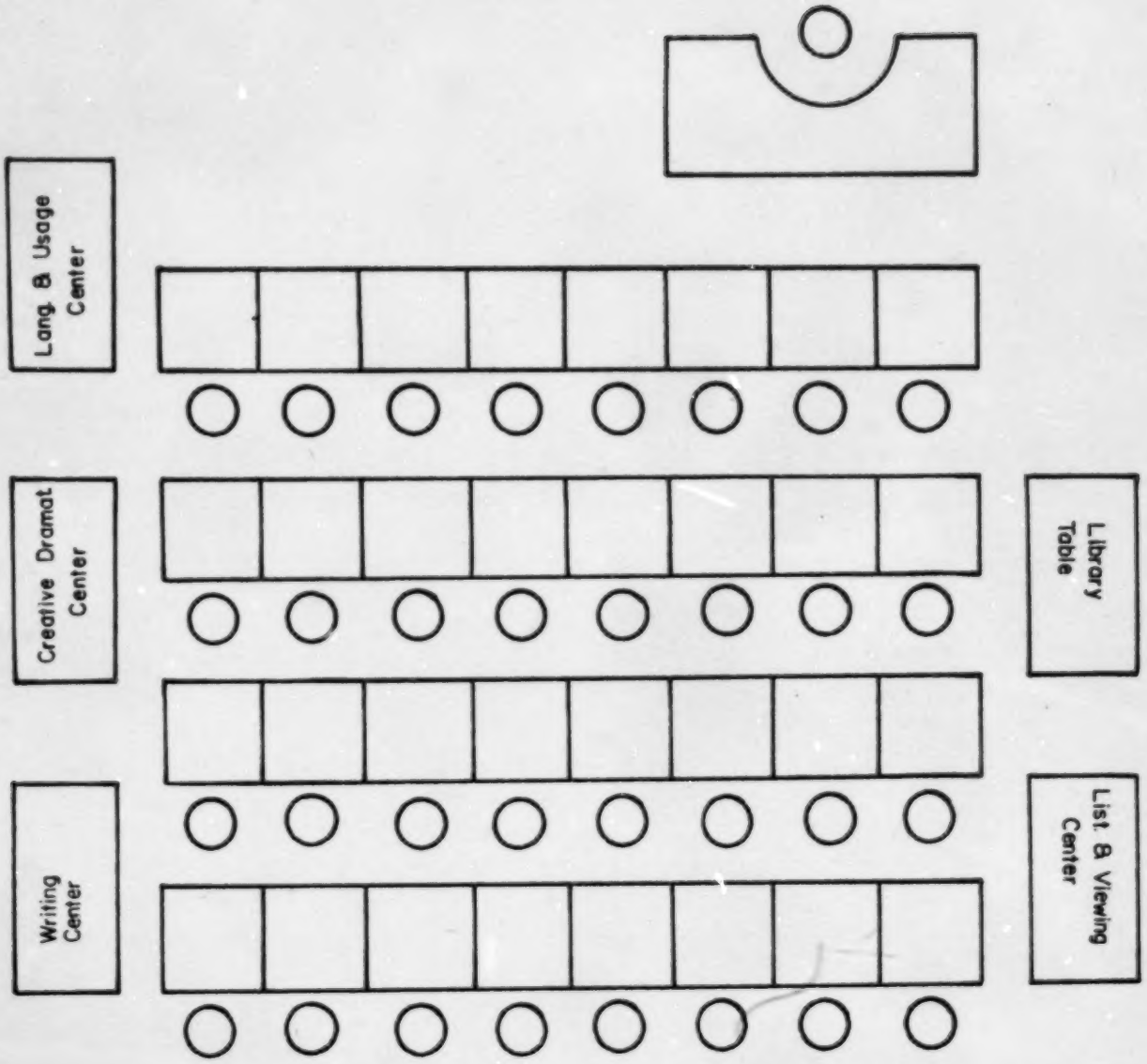
Lang & Usage Center
Creative Dramat Center
Writing Center
Library Table
List & Viewing Center

FIGURE 2

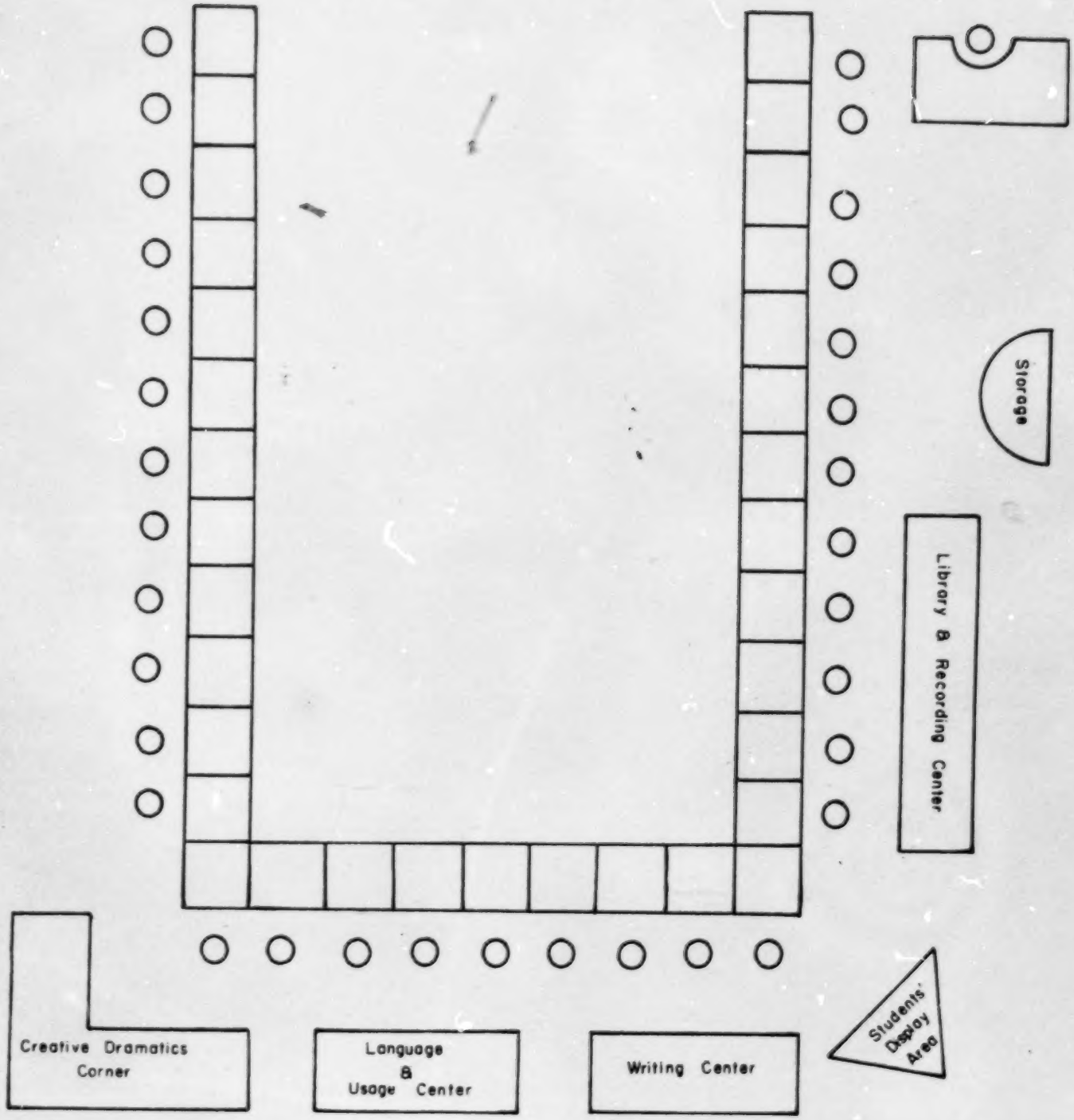
Storage
Library & Recording Center
Students' Display Area
Creative Dramatics Corner
Language & Usage Center
Writing Center

FIGURE 3

Library
Writing Corner
Listening & Viewing Center
Creative Dramatics Center
Language and Usage Center

FIGURE 4

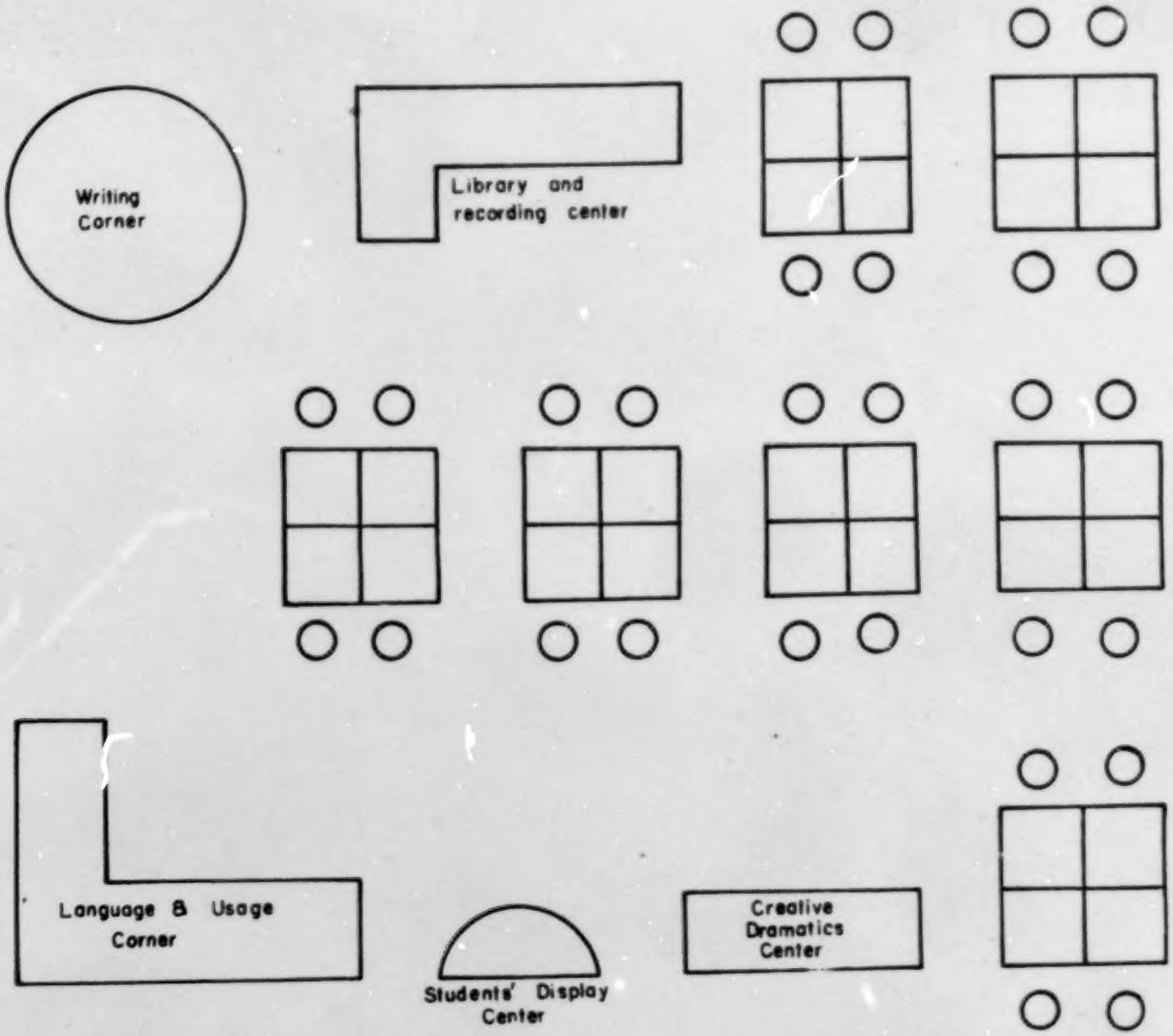
Writing
Corner
Library and
recording center
Language & Usage
Corner
Students' Display
Center
Creative
Dramatics
Center

FIGURE 5

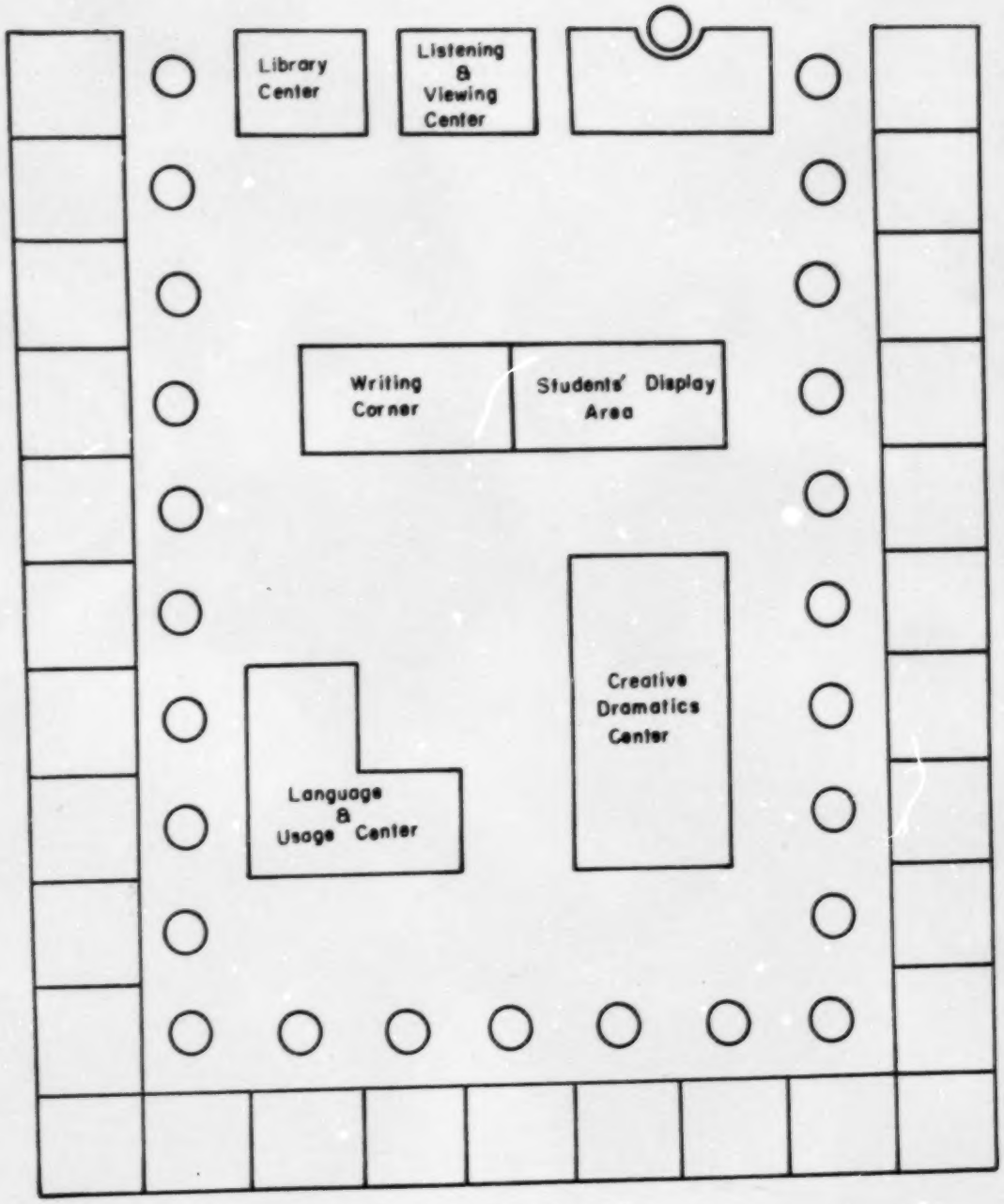
Library Center
Listening & Viewing Center
Writing Corner
Students' Display Area
Creative Dramatics Center
Language & Usage Center

FIGURE 6

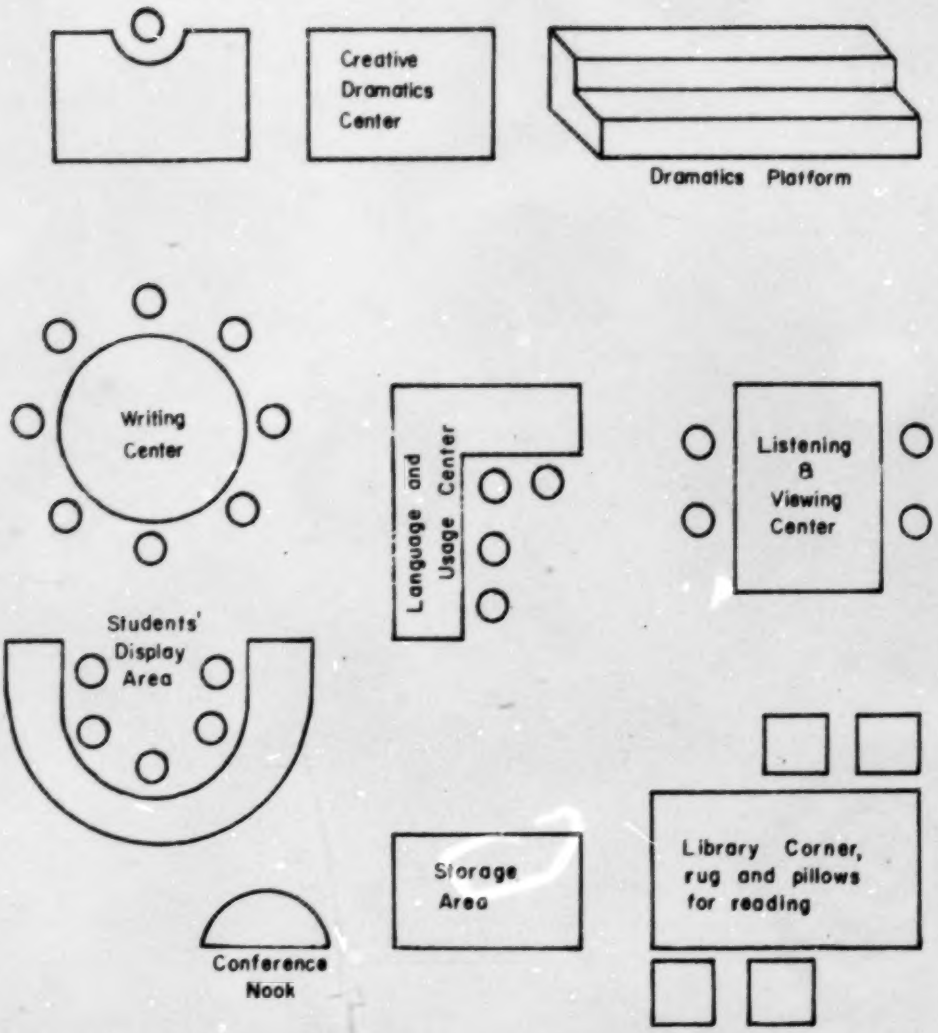
Creative
Dramatics
Center
Dramatics Platform
Writing
Center
Language and
Usage Center
Listening
&
Viewing
Center
Students'
Display
Area
Storage
Area
Library Corner,
rug and pillows
for reading
Conference
Nook

FIGURE 7

The room designs range from Figure 1 which is the more or less formal or traditional seating arrangement where students face the teacher and are by implication under his control, to Figure 7 where the classroom is completely free of individual desks and chairs. The layouts revolve chiefly around the use of interest or activity centers which are one way to begin opening up a room. Blitz's choice of centers have been modified to make them more consistent with an English classroom.

Centers can include a language and usage center, a writing corner, a creative dramatics center, a listening and viewing center, a library and accompanying corner for quiet reading, and a center where students can display their own works and other objects they want to share with their classmates. Such materials can include favorite reading and writing selections or even original poetry and short stories.

It is important to anticipate how the students will move around the room. Quiet centers for writing or reading should be located where there is a minimum of traffic and noise. One can use screens, bookshelves, or other semi-movable partitions to block such an area off. A teacher's activity centers can be as imaginative and as plentiful as one's facilities and ingenuity allow. There are almost infinite possibilities for the creative design of a room. For example, a number of teachers within the author's experience have built a loft area above the classroom where students can read, study, or work together in small groups.

In addition, there are many sources that illustrate and explain how and with what you can decorate and organize the ceilings, walls, floors, and windows of a classroom. A few include:

1. Berger, Allen and Blanche Hope Smith (eds.) Re-Vision, Classroom Practices in Teaching English. NCTE, 1974.
2. Engel, Brenda. Arranging the Informal Classroom. Newton, Mass.: Education Development Center, 1973.
3. Judy, Stephen. Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975.
4. Taylor, Joy. Organizing the Open Classroom. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.
5. Silberman, Charles. The Open Classroom Reader. New York: Vintage, 1973.
6. Graham, Robert M. Alternative Strategy in English Classrooms. NCTE, 1973.

There are basically three different levels or kinds of student involvement in an open, English classroom: large group or whole class involvement, small group involvement, and individual or independent study programs. One of the goals of the open concept is to individualize as much as possible, even though larger groupings are sometimes expedient and sensible. For instance, an obvious example of the usefulness of a large group is for all students to see simultaneously a movie or to hear an outside speaker. However, we must constantly return to our definition of learning, for according to open education learning theory a student learns best when he is an active, crucial agent in his own learning process, learning occurring as the result of this self-

initiated, individual interaction with the world he inhabits.

One way to individualize the curriculum and work with smaller groups of students is to set up "contracts" or a Project-Centered approach with the class which permit different students to work on different assignments at the same time. This might even include an assignment initiated or suggested by a student in satisfaction of a particular objective or task. Either individual or small groups of students can work on common assignments or projects.

One can also set up "activity cards" at learning centers or in a special centralized file within the room. These are usually individual tasks that a student can complete on his own. Although similar to contracts the immediate range is usually narrower and the student often has more autonomy and freedom of choice about what and when to do particular assignments. Such a device in addition to individualizing the curriculum, is also an excellent way to reinforce previously introduced concepts or ideas in the curriculum that are often presented initially to the entire class. For example, there are many alternative descriptive writing assignments that would provide practice for such a competency. Students could select assignments at their leisure and to their liking and even make up their own assignment, assumedly with the guidance of their teacher.

A similar technique to activity cards but more comprehensive in scope is the Learning Activity Packet or LAP which is a self-contained set of objectives and related activities on particular

topics for individual or small groups of students. It is usually self-pacing and dependent on the responsibility of individual student work plans.

One of the most important points to emphasize is that with any alternative arrangement or approach the teacher must make sure that the students understand what is expected of them. For instance, independent study cannot be effective unless a student comprehends what the teacher means by the term and how he wants the student to proceed.

A third area that is crucial to the open concept is the integration of subject matter, not only within the English curriculum itself which would include the interrelatedness of language skills, literature, and the development of writing, but as English relates to other subject matter areas. John Dewey in The Child and the Curriculum states,

> The child's life is an integral, a total one. He passes quickly and readily from one topic to another but is not conscious of transition or break. There is no conscious isolation, hardly conscious distinction. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along.
>
> Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital, and we realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process.[2]

The most frequent subject matter integration is between English and social studies. However, there is no reason why other

subjects cannot be included. In a recent multi-disciplinary unit taught at the Fredonia Middle School in Fredonia, New York, a team of teachers combined language arts skills, social studies and mathematics concepts into a unit entitled "The Making of a President." The unit involves a number of integrated skills such as organizing political parties, studying propaganda techniques, utilizing campaign strategies including the writing of political speeches, and studying the ways statisticians predict election results. The ability to ask discerning questions and to grasp the common processes behind isolated disciplines is what is important if we are to produce broadly educated students. Certainly the discipline of English cannot remain isolated for very long without straining at a realistic and complete construct of reality.

Two of the most important areas when considering the application of open education to the English classroom are the psychological environment and the role of the teacher. Let us first consider the psychological environment. In a USOE-sponsored research study the author conducted a few years ago[3], which attempted to determine the characteristics of open classrooms in New York State, three crucial variables defined the psychological environment -- the presence of multi-aged, heterogeneous grouping and closely tied to this the lack of a fear of failure and a more healthy classroom competition.

The temporary grouping of students according to their needs rather than by grade level, age, or by ability is a central characteristics of the open concept. The process of sorting and classifying students is at the very least overdone in American education. At its worst it produces a feeling of humiliation, hopelessness and despair for the student in being placed in a special class or categorization. Such an arrangement may actually be worse than including such students in a regular class and having them receive possibly lower grades. James Moffett and others speak of the benefits of heterogeneous classes. The resultant discourse of many voices can only strengthen the language and thinking abilities of any student, strong or weak. Insularity of the superior student can be as limiting as it is for the slower one. Points of view are not an absolute. Slower students possess them in as much abundance as the "better" student and often in more original and off-beat ways.

The fear of failure is often not so great in a classroom where one learns it is possible to benefit from mistakes rather than having to hide from one's errors in order to avoid ridicule. A student does not fail if he is able to adjust to his errors, rather than having the latter totaled up against him by the teacher or his peers. Studies have shown that children usually learn best in an atmosphere which provides much challenge and little threat.

Closely related to grouping and to the threat of failure is the fierce competitiveness that exists at all levels in American schools. Students are constantly being ranked and evaluated and

in a way that tends to elevate a student at the expense of his classmates. There is no better way of guaranteeing the creation of personal feelings of inadequacy. Because in open education the emphasis is so heavily on the individual capabilities and performance level of each student with students engaged in many different tasks, competition is still present but not so much of a threat. Competition often becomes more a motivation to try harder with the emphasis still being on the efforts and accomplishments of the individual student.

Carl Rogers summarizes the role of the teacher in an open English classroom by stating that we cannot really teach a student, we can merely create conditions where we help a student learn. Rogers defines the components for what he calls "person-centered learning" by listing the following:

1. This facilitative person shares with the others - teachers, students, and possibly parents or community members - the responsibility for the learning process.

2. The facilitator provides learning resources - from personal experience, from books or other materials, or from community experiences.

3. Each student develops a program of learning, alone or in cooperation with others.

4. A facilitative learning climate is provided.

5. The focus is primarily on fostering the continuing process of learning.

6. The discipline necessary to read the student's goals is a self-discipline, and is recognized and accepted by the learner as being his/her own responsibility.

7. The evaluation of the extent and significance of the student's learning is made primarily by the learner, though this self-evaluation may be influenced and enriched by caring feedback from other members of the group and from the facilitator.

8. In this growth-promoting climate, the learning tends to be deeper, proceeds at a more rapid rate, and is more pervasive in the life and behavior of the student than learning acquired in the traditional classroom.[4]

If we accept Rogers' description as an accurate characterization of the learning process then we must ask how an English teacher can operate as a supporter or facilitator of this learning process rather than as a mere disseminator of knowledge. Anne Bussis and Edward Chittenden have constructed a model of the role of an open classroom teacher which provides an effective way of viewing the activities and tasks of a teacher in an open classroom.[5] Bussis and Chittenden divide teacher behavior into three categories: "The Teacher's Internal Frame of Reference," "Activities When Children Are Not Present," and "Interactive Behaviors with Children." The first involves the knowledge, beliefs, ideas, and values a teacher brings to the teaching task. It includes both ideas related to children and to the process of learning as well as ideas related to the perception of self.

Under the category of "Activities When Children Are Not Present" provisioning for learning stands as one of the most important sub-areas. Consistent with the definition of a teacher as a facilitator of the learning process, we are interested in providing not only suitable materials and resources but in trying to determine

how students might see and use these materials. For example, a story may be used to teach irony, but the students may be more interested in the excitement of the story itself, or may be absorbed in their response to the story which may or may not include irony. Often, the students' interpretation or perception is as important to deal with as the original point of the lesson.

In considering the category "Interactive Behaviors with Children" the diagnosis of learning events involves not only the importance of sensitive record-keeping and assessment techniques but the observation of students while they are involved in classroom activities and materials. The sum total of such diagnostic information is what the teacher uses in the structuring and ordering of the classroom environment. The importance of this area springs from the role of the teacher as a resource person whose job it is to encourage and influence the direction and growth of learning activity in and outside of the classroom.

Three final areas Bussis and Chittenden discuss under "Interactive Behaviors with Children" are honesty of encounters, respect for persons, and warmth. The nature and quality of human interaction is, of course, basic to the teaching-learning process. It is where the effective teaching of English, humanistic education, and open education ultimately bisect.

Everything we have been saying implies that if we adopt a different structure and approach to the teaching of English whether it be classroom design, different kinds of student involvement, or the role of the teacher, then we must also change many of the

ways we approach English as a subject. It is no coincidence that a number of voices in the field of English speak of the process of English. Their definition brings us full circle. Our discussion of the English classroom in light of open education is but another way of providing an effective vehicle for those basic areas of communication, reading, and recording that we call English.

[1]Barbara Blitz. The Open Classroom: Making It Work. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973, pp. 98-106.

[2]John Dewey. The Child and the Curriculum. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902, p. 9, 16.

[3]Philip S. Morse. A Survey of Selected Public Elementary Open Classrooms in New York State. Final Report. Washington, D.C.: Center for Educational Research and Development, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1973. (available in ERIC as ED 067747)

[4]Carl Rogers. "Beyond the Watershed: And Where Now?" Educational Leadership. May, 1977, pp. 626-627.

[5]Anne M. Bussis and Edward A. Chittenden. Analysis of an Approach to Open Education, Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service. 1970, pp. 28-49.

PHILIP S. MORSE

Dr. Philip S. Morse has been a speaker and consultant on open education and English Education for numerous school districts in New York State and Canada. He was the co-director of a New York State funded Redesign Project in the Cassadaga Valley Central Schools dealing with a community-classroom cooperative involvement model supporting the open classroom approach. He has been a researcher in open education for the U.S. Office of Education. He has published in several journals including The Peabody Journal of Education, English Journal, and Research in Education. Presently, Dr. Morse is teaching graduate and undergraduate courses on the open classroom and English Education at SUNY College at Fredonia. He is a former English teacher and is presently an assistant professor in the elementary and early childhood education department at the College at Fredonia.